THE GOOD NEWS AND THE BAD NEWS

February 16, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Jeremiah 17:5-8
Luke 6:17-26

"Blessed are you who are hungry... Woe to you who are full."
-Luke 6:21, 25 (NRSV)

Sometimes the news is bad as well as good.

William Sloane Coffin, former chaplain at Yale, minister of Riverside Church, and highly visible social activist, likes to tell about the time in the early 1970s when he was preaching in a large, substantial suburban church about the Vietnam War and economic justice. Afterward, shaking hands with the worshipers, a woman of obvious affluence, took his hand between her two gloved hands, leaned forward as if to pay him a generous compliment and growled "Coffin, you no-good..." (you can fill in the blanks).

Every preacher who heard him tell about that laughed because something like it has happened to all of us. For me it was in the South, in a large, substantial church. I had been invited to speak on the Hagar/Sarah story in the Old Testament and how it relates to women's issues in the 1990s - which I did. Afterward, in the line, I was introduced to a woman whose family had been in the congregation for generations, whose great-great grandfathers and uncles - Elders and Civil War Generals whose pictures adorned the hallway gallery. She was charming, gracious and she said sweetly, shaking my hand, "Dr. Buchanan, it was so nice of you to come all the way down here from Chicago to be with us. That sermon was awful. I just hated it." And continuing to smile sweetly, off she went. No one had heard her. I, of course, said, "Thank you very much."

Allowing for the possibility that it was indeed an awful sermon, there are topics and there are texts which we do not particularly like to hear, in fact, don't like at all. If, as historians of religion observe, one of the functions of religion is to support the prevailing values of the culture, there are whole major pieces of Biblical religion which do the exact opposite, namely challenge the culture - and they always make us

uncomfortable. And take it from me, it is no more fun for the preacher than the congregation. To work with the text, to understand it at all, is to stand under it, as one of the people; to hear it, first of all addressed to oneself personally. Besides, as Jim Forbes said here two weeks ago, church-goers have become adept at dealing with and dismissing that brand of polemical preaching on the tough topics which he called "Homiletical Manipulations." That's when the preacher announces God's judgment from the safety of the sidelines - or the height of a Gothic pulpit. The preacher knows better than anybody that he/she stands beneath the "woe to you" as well as the "blessed are you," the bad news as well as the good news.

In fact the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not exclusively good news. A better way to say that is - there is a sense in which you can't hear the gospel until you know some bad, or at least ambiguous, news. There is a sense in which the truth about God is only accessible when something or someone helps us see that the truth about humankind is not very pretty. There is a sense in which you can't appreciate, enjoy or even taste the bread of life until you have experienced and explored your hunger. "You have created our hearts restless until they find their rest in you," St. Augustine observed. And the meaning is clearly that there will be no resting until a person acknowledges and begins to own up to the restlessness.

The Christian religion becomes trivial when it confines its energy to proclaiming good news without calling attention to the bad news; when the best it can do is hand out therapeutic advice about developing self-esteem, when it refuses to acknowledge suffering and evil on history and on life.

Reinhold Niebuhr was remembered at a scholarly symposium in New York City last November on the 100th anniversary of his birth. Niebuhr was a professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary and was recognized in a Time magazine cover story in 1948 as America's most influential political philosopher. One of the great philosophical contributions he made to the public discourse about the state and future of the nation and the world was rearticulating the Judeo-Christian notion of the human condition - which is not always rosy and optimistic. In the ashes of World War II, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, Niebuhr suggested that Christian religion has a viable way to discuss the human condition, namely its propensity to selfishness, self-centeredness or, as it used to be called, "old-fashioned sin," and how relatively innocent, guileless individuals can get caught up in systemic evil - like Naziism or the systemic racism we've been thinking about - which nobody seems to intend or mean. The Judeo-Christian tradition knows something about the nature of humankind, Niebuhr asserted. Some observations the world is inclined to ignore because the news is often bad before it is good.

Nowhere is this dynamic clearer nor more sharply experienced than when the New Testament gets around to talking about poor people and rich people. Throughout the Bible there are a lot of nice things said about poor people and a lot of not-so-nice things said about rich people. The poor are held up as models of piety; the rich are used as examples of greed. The poor get exalted; the rich are brought low and in one memorable text compared to overweight cows. God, some have said, seems to prefer the poor, all of which makes those of us who are not poor, very uncomfortable, sometimes angry even. Bob Lynn, astute theologian who worked a while for the Lilly Endowment, said that the matter of affluence is the greatest theological challenge facing the American churches. We must do one of three things he said: find a way to ignore a major Biblical motif, or become poor, or try to figure out what it means to be Christian and not poor.

Now let's look at what's happening in the text. It is Luke who told us about the shepherds at Bethlehem, who introduces the topic in Mary's Magnificat.

> "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones...lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty."

And then, almost at the beginning of the story of Jesus' public ministry Luke tells about the time when he was orienting his newly appointed apostles and said:

> "Blessed are the poor.
> Blessed are the hungry.
> Blessed are those who weep.
> Blessed are those who are excluded, reviled and defamed."

Which is all right until he continues.

> "Woe to you who are rich.
> Woe to you who are full.
> Woe to you who are laughing.
> Woe to you when people speak well of you."

It is not exhortation. Luke is not saying that Jesus said, "become poor - become hungry." The form is descriptive. Blessed, happy actually, are the poor. Woe to the rich who have received their consolation, i.e. they already have what they want.

There are justice issues here, but more importantly there are spiritual issues. In a happiness contest between poor people and rich people, Jesus said the poor are more likely to be happy. The rich are - well, rich.

Robert Bellah, University of California sociologist has edited a new book, The Good Society. Bellah spoke to a National Council of Churches Conference on the New World Order and did an interesting thing with the Biblical notion of the poor and the rich.

Citing the work of another scholar, Albert Borgmann, Bellah observes that Biblical poverty and contemporary poverty are very different phenomena. There were, of course, occasional famines in the ancient world, but in Israel with its strong sense of community and its tradition of caring for the outsiders, the truly poor did not starve to death.

By contrast Bellah describes two types of modern poverty.

"Brutal poverty," he defines as "the terrible unnecessary poverty in a world economically and technologically capable of eliminating poverty."

It's the poverty you can see a few blocks from here, in plain view of one of the most visible concentrations of wealth in the world... children, living in third world conditions, with underfunded and inadequate education, virtually no health care... young men listlessly standing on the corner... teen-agers, a virtual army with walkie-talkies protecting the drug dealers who have clearly won the war we so bravely declare on then every election year. Systemic poverty. Nobody's fault poverty. We don't mean it poverty. Brutal poverty.

Of equal importance is something Bellah identifies as "Advanced poverty..." This is the poverty of the rich, the "spiritually debilitating affluence" of those who have what they want, who "have their consolation."

This is the poverty described by a psychiatrist in Time recently as the success syndrome, the depression which results from accomplishing one's goals and having an enormous amount of money.

This is the poverty produced by a society which has defined the meaning of life, blessedness, if you will, in terms of having things, a society which has lost touch entirely with one of its founders' favorite concepts, namely sufficiency or "enough" or having what one needs. The trouble is a culture which has not yet come to terms with the notion of limits.

Bellah reported that 70% of the American people know there's something wrong, that we're off the track. He calls it a social and cultural and spiritual recession. And, of course, he's not the only voice crying in the wilderness. Cartoonist Jules Feiffer wrote a little book during the 80's called Tantrum in which a

forty-two-year-old man becomes a two-year-old again, entirely devoted to gratifying his needs and desires... an image of the culture, Feiffer proposed. He wrote, "There must be something more to life than having everything."

Those wonderful New Yorker cartoons address the topic regularly.

In one a cigar-smoking tycoon gazes out of the window of his huge and elaborate office at the smoke stacks of the industry over which he presides and says, "You may not be able to serve God and mammon, but it doesn't hurt to put a little away for a rainy day."

And just last week, poking fun at our tendency to define all of life - even its delectability in terms of profit and loss - a businessman is sheepishly handing his wife a folder as she says "Gee, Jeffrey, an annual report on our marriage is a novel anniversary gift, but I was hoping for something a little more romantic."

More seriously President Vaclav Havel of Czechoslovakia said,

> "We live in a spoiled moral environment. We have become morally ill. We have learned not to believe in anything, not to care about each other, to worry only about ourselves." [See Bellah, p.12]

The Biblical argument with wealth is not that wealth is evil, or that it is wrong to have enough food. There is nothing more useless than feeling guilty for simply being who one is - and to cultivate that guilt is a theological cheap shot. The Biblical argument is that wealth sometimes, more often than not, convinces people that they are self-sufficient, self-made, needing no one. The poor, on the other hand, are under no such illusion. The poor often depend on God because there is no one else. And that, the Bible says, or perhaps its most dramatic and profound prescription, is the secret of blessedness: not having everything, knowing one's dependence on God and neighbor.

It is, I would propose a very timely word. We've been thinking a lot recently about national self-sufficiency primarily in terms of the manufacture and sale of automobiles. But the world has become interdependent. One of the most popular American automobiles is assembled in Germany and Britain as well as the U.S.A. from parts manufactured in Spain, Italy, Japan and Brazil. Ninety-five per cent of the baseball gloves sold here are made in Japan, out of American cowhide which is first shipped to Brazil for tanning.

The future of the world depends on our understanding and coping with interdependence. And suddenly the ancient words of scripture make a great deal of contemporary sense.

It is not merely a matter of political revolution, not merely a matter of taking from the rich and giving to the poor. As we have watched socialist economies collapse and fail to provide basic goods and services, we know that the market, the generation of profit and capital contains the energy to feed the world.

But it is not, finally, a matter of politics and economics. It is a matter of spirituality. Bellah has a particularly wise word here.

> "If the basic problem is turning the have-nots into haves, the political and economic struggle is central and the churches have a minor role to play. But if our problems have to do with the whole notion that <u>having</u> is the meaning of life, then the teaching of the Bible may be more decisive. Biblical poverty, the notion that we must let go of everything we have and depend only on God and our neighbor, may be the only thing that will save us."

What the Bible suggests is that you don't have anything you can't give away. In fact, if you can't give it away, it has you - you are owned, shaped, influenced and determined by what you have given your life to get.

In fact, if you can't give it away, the Bible suggests you aren't even able to enjoy it very much.

Bellah, the sociologist, suggests that we pray not merely for political and economic change, but more essentially, for "a conversion of ourselves and our institutions."

If you think you are self-sufficient the bad news is that you are wrong. But it is also, at the same time, the good news.

Because to know your needs, to know your poverty is to be open to God's blessing.

It is to know and celebrate, not your autonomy, but your belonging to the human race. It is to know that to have everything you want and to be alone is to be lonely, and that to have nothing but people you love is to be very wealthy.

Blessed are you - God's kingdom is yours - when you forget about yourself and live for others.

Blessed are you when you purchase a gift and give it away and enjoy the delight of the person to whom you gave the gift more than you would have enjoyed receiving it.

Blessed are you when the people you love are happy.

Blessed are you, not when you have everything, but when you have enough for yourself and are in the process of using the rest to affirm your membership in the human family.

Blessed are you where in the middle of listening to great music or standing before great art you suddenly know your own smallness, your own poverty which allows you to be touched by the mysterious beauty, and the greater reality to which it points.

Blessed are you when you know you are not self-made genetically, emotionally, physically, morally; that you are not self-sufficient, that you live by grace and forgiveness and acceptance.

Blessed are you when you can open your hands and let go and your hands, now empty, are ready to be filled with God's gifts of love and grace.

So, Good News and Bad News - or better said, what sounds at first like bad news is the good news, the very best news of all. Blessed are you when you simply know who you are; when you know your dependence on God and your neighbors. Blessed are you then: yours is the Kingdom.